

To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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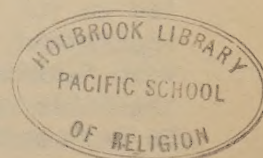
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A THEOLOGY OF RURAL LIFE

By Richard O. Comfort*



As I was leaving a session of the recent meeting of the National Convocation on the Town and Country Church, I overheard a startling remark. One of the ministers said, "The trouble with rural church leaders is that they substitute sociology for theology. Sociology can never take the place of theology." I have thought about that statement and believe it contains enough truth to challenge us to examine our position and discover whether or not we have done as this man said.

Another claim which merits attention is that rural church leaders have substituted a philosophical theology for a biblical theology. For this reason people think of theology as a dry system of doctrines which many argue about but few understand. The average layman assumes the discussion is getting too deep when ministers start talking about theology.

If rural churchmen have not actually yielded to these temptations during the last fifty years, they have come close to it at times. It is partly for this reason that both ministers and laymen often feel left out at many rural church conferences. Ministers with little training in sociology may think the rural church movement is losing its purpose as it searches for methods to do a better job. Laymen who find help and comfort from a direct reading of the Bible can easily find themselves lost in some theological discussions based upon philosophy and man-made doctrines.

What is the place of sociology in the rural church movement? Is there such a thing as a theology of rural life? If so, should it be a philosophical or a biblical theology? It is my conviction that there is a biblical theology which is vital, meaningful, and helpful to rural people. It is likewise my belief that sociology can be of great help to us as rural church workers if we regard its findings as means to accomplish our work and not the ends

* An address delivered before the National Presbyterian Town and Country Church Conference at Champaign, Illinois, October 24, 1951. We are indebted to Dr. Comfort, who holds a fourfold job at present: Head of the Sociology Department at Park College, Parkville, Mo.; Dean of Religious Life at Park College; part-time member of the National Town and Country Church Institute staff, with headquarters at Roanridge; and in charge of the Extension Program of The Theological Seminary of the University of Dubuque, located on the Park College campus.

toward which we are striving.

If we go to the Bible rather than to the philosophers for our theological concepts, we are immediately at home. The Bible speaks of things that rural people know and understand. It is concrete. It speaks of people and their problems, not of ideas and their categories. It deals with the whole man, not just with his mind.

Today as churchmen we face many problems which our forefathers did not have. Formerly it could be assumed that the average congregation was well oriented in the Bible and its message. The task of the minister was to help people understand the full meaning and application of biblical ideas with which they were familiar. Today the average rural minister cannot assume much knowledge of the Bible on the part of the congregation. This is true even in the "Bible belt." He must both teach and interpret the word of God.

Traditionally we have thought of theology in terms of certain doctrines and a system of ideas and concepts which present and clarify those doctrines. We need to rethink our theology today in terms that will be meaningful and helpful for rural people.

There have been two trends in theological discussions. The first is to discuss theology in terms which mystify the layman and make him wonder what the minister is talking about. The second trend is to forget theology or put it in a closet for safekeeping. In this manner we keep it safe and clean from heresies. There is danger in either of these trends. We need to rethink our theology in terms of its application to rural life. We must simplify its terms, preach it from our pulpits, and talk about it during pastoral calls so that it may become the bread of life for the people. Theology, which is the science of God and of religion, is a necessary part of our Christian faith. It deals with the vital and important beliefs of Christian people.

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

There are at least four doctrines which are basic in a Christian theology of rural life: God, man, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. If time permitted, others might be considered.

In presenting the idea of God to rural people, we should not begin with the idea of the first cause, the religious nature of man, or some other philosophical concept. It would be better to begin with the biblical concept of God as the creator and sustainer of our world. Jesus taught us to pray saying, "Our Father." He did not begin with the ontological argument. We need to help people see God's creative process at work in our world today. Many people lift up their eyes to the hills without any awareness of God's handiwork.

God sustains his world. The psalmist spoke truly when he said, "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein." If people can understand the meaning and significance of this verse, their understanding of the doctrine of God will be more clear. It is important that we understand the concept of God in such a way that we can apply this understanding to our daily living.

As country people observe the miracle of birth among plants in the springtime, among animals on the farm, or in their own families, are they aware

of the ongoing creative processes of God? I have always been grateful to the doctor who asked me to witness the birth of our first son. As I entered the delivery room, I had never before related the process of birth to God and his creative work. After spending forty minutes there, I agreed with the doctor who said, "The birth of a child represents the working of God." I had seen a life begin and realized the presence of God. He will not be an abstract or remote figure for people if we will help them see him at work in his world. Birth is only one of his manifestations.

THE DOCTRINE OF MAN

Similarly we need to regard man as the child of God. Too often our thinking about man begins with theories about his pre-existence and his depravity. Again we are inclined to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think. It is refreshing at times to see ourselves as others see us.

The Bible tells us that man was created to have dominion over the earth as a steward. What does stewardship say to us about man and his relationship to his fellow man, to the land, and to other resources that God has created for us? Man is a steward. He is not the lord of all creation. He is merely part of the creative process and has responsibilities to God for the way he uses human and material products of God's creation.

One effective way to help people understand the place of man as a steward is to use the Lord's Acre program in a local parish. A minister who was trying to teach his people the meaning of Christian stewardship had preached several sermons on the subject with little visible effect. In his pastoral calling he had tried to interpret to his people the responsibilities of Christian stewardship, but he could see little change in their attitudes. So he decided to introduce the Lord's Acre plan as a part of the church program. This interested people, and they made their plans with zeal.

One of the men gave as his Lord's Acre project a small Jersey bull calf. The minister went out to inspect the calf and was a little disappointed in his size and prospect for growth. However, he did not suggest that the man should have dedicated the best he had to the Lord rather than the smallest.

The fact that the calf had been dedicated to the Lord did not change his character in the least. He grew up to be the meanest, most wearisome calf in the herd. One of his favorite tricks was to turn and run away when the farmer drove him up to an open door of the barn. About the fifth time the calf failed to go through the open door, the farmer, a Presbyterian elder, was saying some things he had not learned in Sunday school. It was after that fifth trip around the barn that the minister, who had come for a call, stepped from behind a bush where he had been watching for the past ten minutes. "Hi, Jim. Having some trouble with your calf?" The elder was surprised to see his pastor. "You know, preacher, I think the Lord is trying to teach me something through this young bull. I now realize that I should have dedicated one of those nice Herefords out there in the pasture instead of this little rascal. Whenever I come to the barnyard and see him, I think of a lot of things. However, I most often find myself thinking of God who has given me this calf and all that I have. I know now that all I have belongs to him and that my job is to be a good steward for him. I am learning it the hard way. But this bull calf has taught me the meaning of stewardship."

Man has been created to follow God's will and plan. He can compre-

hend God only as he knows and follows his will. When a man transgresses God's will, he is punished. In the past man has sinned against God as he has misused and exploited the land, that precious thin film of soil that sustains life upon the earth. While it has been easy for man to misuse the soil, it is also possible for him to cooperate with God and help him rebuild the soil. As man understands the creative process and works with, rather than against, God, he can redeem the land and restore it to full production. Many programs are at work in America to redeem the land. The Soil Conservation Service, the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Friends of the Soil, and other programs are helping us understand how we can do our part to renew the land.

It is the opportunity and responsibility of the rural church to interpret the meaning of sin and waste to people in theological terms that they can understand and to help them discover the real meaning of Christian stewardship.

Man's sin against his fellow man has been as great as his sin against the land. He has thought of his fellow man as a commodity to be used for his own purposes rather than as one of God's children. The Bible is replete with illustrations which help one understand his relationship to his neighbors. The story of the Prodigal Son is being re-enacted daily before our eyes. We need to see its implications in our day-to-day transactions with each other. The story of the Good Samaritan also has universal appeal today. It is as relevant now as in the days when Jesus told it.

After having preached three times on the story of the Good Samaritan one Sunday, I was driving home late at night. Suddenly one of the tires on my car blew out. It was late; I was weary and in no mood to change a tire. However, I soon discovered I would have to change it. As I worked, many cars went by on the other side. I could imagine the occupants saying to themselves, "The poor fellow, this is a bad time to change a tire. I'm glad I'm not in his place." Whatever their thoughts may have been, no one took the trouble to stop and help me. When I had almost finished, there came a voice out of the dark saying, "May I help you?" Seeing no face, I was somewhat mystified until a young Negro stepped before the headlights of my car. After thanking him for his offer, I thought to myself, "The story of the Good Samaritan has been re-enacted again tonight here in middle Tennessee. My white friends passed by on the other side, but it was the samaritan of the South who offered his help."

THE DOCTRINE OF CHRIST

We need not begin our teaching about Christ with the doctrine of the atonement. Rather let us begin our thinking about Jesus with the declaration that "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have everlasting life." It is just as important to help people receive this gift of God's love and realize its significance for their lives as it is for them to know the theories of the work of Christ. "What think ye of Christ?" is a question which must be answered by our people. And it is important to help them find an adequate answer in life here and now. As they answer this question, the meaning of the incarnation should become real to them. Even as Jesus became the incarnation of the will of God in the life of man, so must we realize the immediacy of his working in the life of our time. "Not my will, but thine be done," Jesus prayed. He came to heal, to teach, and to preach, and he said, "If ye love me, keep my commandments." As we believe in him and keep his commandments,

the doctrine of Christ becomes understandable and meaningful to laymen and ministers alike. Our understanding of this doctrine will be judged by our lives. "By their fruits ye shall know them."

We have in our front yard at home a tree that looks like a peach tree, has leaves like a peach tree, and the bark of a peach tree. The only trouble with that tree is it does not produce peaches. It does not produce the thing which it was created to produce. Therefore, next year I shall either graft some new branches on the old stump or get rid of the whole tree. I have no room for a tree that does not produce fruit.

There are many who claim to be Christian but who are not producing Christian fruit in their lives. For them the doctrine of Christ is dead and meaningless. It is our privilege as rural church leaders to lift up the doctrine of Christ so that it may be a living belief in the lives of those who are trying to live the Christian life.

THE DOCTRINE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

We come now to one of the most neglected and confused of all theological doctrines. Yet it is one of the most important of all the doctrines. Take the Holy Spirit out of the Book of Acts and what have you left? The Holy Ghost was recently defined by a teen-ager, who had been to Sunday school for several years and had listened to a great deal of preaching, as a ghost full of holes. This serious statement indicates that too many ministers have been invisible during the week and incomprehensible on Sunday. The Holy Spirit is still at work in our world today. We must recognize his work and help our people to do so. We may be able to do very little by ourselves, but as we yield ourselves to the Holy Spirit, we will be able to do all things.

The Spirit of God can take our surrendered lives and use them for the building of his kingdom on earth. If we will give our lives to God and through his Spirit seek first his kingdom, we will be surprised at what we can do together in rural churches to win the world for Christ and his way of life.

THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

Time allows for only the mention of the need to rethink our doctrine of the church. Is the church more than just a social institution? If it is, in what way is it different from other agencies? Does the average layman in rural America realize this difference? Can we present this aspect of the rural church in a clear, simple, and meaningful way which will help the town and country church become a more significant institution in the lives of those who belong to it?

It is our task and privilege as leaders in the town and country church movement to present the Gospel of Christ to our people so that they can understand it. Thus, understanding, they can believe; and believing, they will receive that salvation which comes from God.

In the fourth chapter of Zechariah we read that the angel of the Lord came to Zerubbabel and said, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit saith the Lord of hosts." Through this power let us rethink and reinterpret the great theological doctrines so that they may become the basis of Christian faith, giving life and hope to rural people throughout the world.

